

Journey of Reshaping the Meaning of Work as an Underemployed Woman: Cases of Korean Millennial Women

Jiyea Park

University of Georgia

Abstract: This paper reports the results of a qualitative study based on the feminist perspective and qualitative feminist interviews. Before their interviews, the 10 participants wanted to share their negative experiences of underemployment; however, deep conversations revealed that while their stories were negative, they were also positive. Through the interviews, participants disclosed what motivated them to continue their careers despite the onus of gender-specific job segregation in the Korean job market that is biased against Korean Millennial women. As they were sharing their experiences, the participants had an A-Ha! moment that reshaped their definitions of the meaning of work. These findings have important implications for policy decisions regarding women's career development education and adult education programs for overqualified women in the workplace.

Keywords: Korean Millennial women, meaning of work, reshaping, underemployment

Jiyoung, 41 years old, identified herself as an underemployed Korean Millennial woman. She holds a master's degree in early childhood education but experienced underemployment four times and career discontinuation twice due to pregnancy. Jiyoung was the principal of a childcare center for nine years but described the job market as completely different when she sought a job in her mid-20s and late 30s. Presently, Jiyoung works in a bakery — completely different from her previous job and her master's program discipline. She experienced numerous restrictions to her reemployment when she reentered the job market in her late 30s.

Jiyoung's story echoes those of well-educated Korean Millennial women across South Korea (hereafter called Korea for brevity) who are or were in the job market. Millennials in Korea, born between the 1980s and the late 1990s, have received exceptional education, have excellent skills in using digital devices, and have experienced more cultural diversity than those of earlier generations (Eom, 2019). Nonetheless, the continuing economic depression in Korea has forced Korean Millennials to accept job positions below their skill levels. However, Korean Millennial women face more difficulties in the Korean job market (Kim, 2013). Kim pointed out that Korean women are more likely to be exposed to complex discrimination — including sexual discrimination — in the labor market as they are framed by traditional cultural roles that militate against women; thus, they are relegated to the status of a cheap workforce and marginalized in the Korean job market. In addition, Korean Millennial women experience a significant change in societal role expectations when they get married, affecting their expectations for obtaining good quality jobs in the future or returning to their previous jobs. As a result, experiencing a glass ceiling and sticky floors (often used to describe women's condition at work) can differ between single women and married women (Triana, 2017).

Although numerous studies and reports highlight overqualification and job mismatch among members of the Millennial generation, few studies focus on Korean Millennial women. These include a study of the M-curve pattern in the job market (Choi, 2017; Lee, 2008; Park & Kim, 2003), income inequalities and gender pay gaps (Kim, 2013; Kim & Oh, 2019), and career discontinuation (Cho & Lim, 2015; Choi). A few studies and reports illuminate underemployment among the Millennial generation; however, these studies are more than 10 years old (Eun & Park, 2002; Lee, 1996). Despite the importance of the topic, no prior research exists on the underemployment of Korean Millennial women.

Exploring Korean Millennial women's underemployed job experiences provides a significant resource for interpreting their complex discriminations in the job market. This study documents the vivid experiences of underemployment of 10 Korean Millennial women. The focus of the research questions of this study was: (1) How do underemployed Korean Millennial women describe their job trajectory? (2) How do underemployed Korean Millennial women define the meaning of work?

Related Literature

Trapped in Stereotype: The M-curve

In Korean Millennial women's endeavor to survive in the job market, they face a massive obstacle in their career path: CAREER DISCONTINUATION. Women in this generation are more highly educated than women of their mothers' and grandmothers' generations. However, this well-educated group of women disappears from the job market and the workforce in their late 20s to mid-30s due to marriage, pregnancy, and age discrimination. Researchers have pointed out that the M-curve is the most frequently seen pattern in the Korean women's job market (Choi, 2017; Lee, 2008; Park & Kim, 2003). The term M-curve refers to the shape of the letter "M," and this is easily seen in Korean women's employment graphs. The inverse "U-shape" is most frequently seen in Korean men's employment graphs. These shapes tell of inequalities and gender stereotypes beyond the graph, as the M-curve pattern ended in the 1970s for developed countries, while it is still found in the employment of Korean women among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Han, 2012).

Underemployment

Many scholars have defined underemployment as a person having a higher skill level than the job requires (Feldman, 1996; Green & Henseke, 2016). For example, imagine an architect working in a fast-food service after losing their regular job, which is completely different from their previous job (Allan et al., 2018). Although underemployment is a serious labor market issue, Feldman asserted underemployment is largely ignored; yet, unemployment has received much attention from many scholars.

Existence of Gender-Specific Jobs

Until the 1970s, low-educated young women mainly worked in traditional manufacturing industries in Korea. After the 1980s, Korea's rapid economic growth required women's talents and skills in various fields (Choi, 2017). Many Korean women had opportunities to participate actively in the labor market. Even married women could transfer to the workforce in the 1990s, and well-educated Korean women were a significant force in the job market (Choi, 2017; Min,

2008). However, the majority of Korean women obtained irregular employment, marked by a lower level of pay than that of men and job insecurity (Choi, 2017; Cooke, 2010; Heo, 2013).

Research Approach

For this study, I employed a qualitative research methodology using the feminist perspective and qualitative feminist interviews. “Feminist perspectives view as problematic women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 62). Feminist qualitative researchers focus on learning and understanding the meaning of problems and issues that women participants encounter, seek to examine their experiences and delineate their voices, which historically were neglected. These approaches helped me explore Korean Millennial women’s oppressive situations and listen to their voices as they told me about their experiences as underemployed workers.

I used snowball sampling to locate potential participants, born between 1980 and 1996. I then finalized 10 volunteers who self-identified as underemployed. The interview questions covered personal backgrounds, and life before, during, and after the underemployment, as I was looking for participants who had lived in Korea for at least 15 years and who shared the Korean societal norms and culture. Interviewees were sensitive about disclosing their personal stories, so our interviews were conducted 100% via phone and we used Korean to communicate to have a cozy interview environment. They all agreed to allow me to record the interview, and data analysis materials (i.e., transcript (written in Korean), reflection notes, and partial translation (written in English)) were shared for member-checking within a week. The partial translations were checked by two people fluent in Korean and English and who had experience writing theses and dissertations in English. After that, I asked my personal editor who only speaks English to check the nuance or word choice of quotations. The translation and back translation were helpful in making the data analysis more accurate and clearly delivering the 10 women’s voices.

Major Themes

The 10 participating women revealed they faced social prejudice in the job market, and the moment they felt solidarity with each other reshaped their definition of the meaning of work. In this section, I will walk you through their history of life and career paths shared in dialogues.

Social prejudice: Age discrimination and the Existence of Gender-Specific Jobs

One of the commonalities was the experience of age discrimination in their job trajectories. The participants encountered difficulties in finding a new job in their late 20s. Six participants were single, and job interviews placed them in unpleasant situations. They usually progressed to the final round of the job search process, but some interviewers asked them personal questions about their lives, such as “Are you seeing anyone?”

The 10th interviewee, *Yeaji* described her experience of an unpleasant moment in this way:

I haven’t thought I would face this unpleasant situation in my life. I entered the job market in my late 20s because I worked as a contract worker and prepared for a civil service examination for three years. I mostly have negative memories of the job search. I had 3–4-year gaps in my CV and the interviewers (both men and women) asked me about my

private life. They frequently asked me “Are you seeing anyone?” “When are you getting married?” or “Are you planning to have children?” I was in the job market in my late 20s, so this was not unexpected, but it still hurt...

Marital status was a significant issue while searching for a new job. Three married participants with children experienced both employment discrimination and age discrimination. One participant (The 5th interviewee; Jihye) could not renew her contract because she was pregnant. She was a school music teacher, and the school’s principal first wanted to renew her contract for one more year because of recommendation letters from other teachers. After Jihye accepted the offer and told the principal she was pregnant, he immediately said, “Oh, then I cannot renew your contract because you are pregnant.” She anticipated that response, but it was still painful.

Although they were from different educational and cultural backgrounds, in their career paths, every participant faced limited opportunities to find jobs; job postings or headhunters mainly recommended them to apply for jobs in service fields, which was not related to their interests or previous job experiences.

The 10th interviewee, Yeaji shared how she entered underemployment in her career path:
Jobs in the service industry I applied for usually have lower salary compared with other types of occupations. However, I did not have much choice other than the service industry though. Even the headhunter recommended the service fields which did not match my major and dream.

Participants did not devalue these jobs but highlighted the job mismatch. They were all well-educated women. Some had a master’s degree, but most of the time they ended up finding — or headhunters recommended — jobs in service fields. Moreover, they faced the limitations of relegation to gender-specific jobs.

Meaning of Work: Solidarity and a Better Tomorrow

Although some participants were dissatisfied with their roles as workers and identified themselves as underemployed, they recounted experiencing a feeling of solidarity at the workplace. They reported a good relationship with women co-workers because they worked in the same community, they shared interests and sympathies and supported each other. Faced with challenging moments, they built sisterhood and solidarity through community-building and mentorship. Married participants especially experienced sisterhood and solidarity when co-workers unanimously agreed they could bring their children to the workplace. During the COVID-19 pandemic, working moms faced many unexpected situations, such as the closing of a school or kindergarten, and needed to care for their children during the workday.

At the end of the interviews, all participants stated that they expected a better future even though they were currently underemployed. They never thought their current job was the last in their lives. They always planned to move on to the next level and worked very hard on self-development. The sixth interviewee, Minji, said, “I think there is always a chance. With time, there is another chance. Even if it is an underemployment job, you can find the meaning there.”

When I asked the participants what reshaped their definition of the meaning of work, the most common answer was feeling a sense of accomplishment gave them greater self-esteem and self-confidence.

The 7th interviewee, *Jiyoung* described her experience of an unpleasant moment in this way:

Even though my previous jobs and my current job are in underemployed occupations, I am satisfied with it. These jobs made me dream about moving forward to the next step (for better jobs or better life). People might ask me “what do you learn from your job?” I can answer “I am lucky to have this job. I learn from experience. I love my job.” These jobs help me to have a better future.

Jiyoung worked three jobs because she wanted to keep building her career and advancing her self-development. Though people labeled her as underemployed, she felt lucky to have these jobs, stating, “Every job in the world is useful and meaningful. There is nothing useless.”

Discussion

Korean women face daunting issues of social inequality; joining the workforce is a positive tool they use to change the patriarchal and Confucianist Korean society. The women involved in my study consistently demonstrated unwavering determination to advance their careers, irrespective of the obstacles they encountered. This resolute willpower can be seen as their method of resisting the patriarchal power structure. In examining the life histories of the interviewees, it became evident that the phenomenon of gender-based inequality transcends generational boundaries and persists beyond the experiences of their mother’s generation (Baby Boomers, born between 1955 and 1963). These Korean Millennial women actively strive to bridge the societal gap, thereby working towards ending the perpetuation of this cycle within their own generation and preventing its negative impact on future generations.

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